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The Jio-FB tie-up: Will it subliminally influence and monopolise Indian minds?

June 22, 2020, 11:14 AM IST [Dr Muneer](#) in [The Medici Way](#) | [India](#) | TOI



According to technology experts and social scientists, by 2024, a capitalistic conglomerate that straddle media, telecom, entertainment, digital data and e-commerce can easily control a majority of Indian minds.

The recently inked Jio-Facebook deal may have grand-stated objectives of helping India's small businesses and individuals get new opportunities in the post-corona world, but possible un-stated ones are what consumers, partners, competitors, civil society and government should be wary of – That of data privacy, for instance.

Does the new partnership nurture a secret ambition to directly control Indian minds, through digital India? It is laudable that Reliance has been able to become debt-free now but why would it bet big on e-commerce, a business that has not yet proven profitable to even Amazon for years?

With about 300 million users in Facebook, 400 million in WhatsApp and 390 million Jio subscribers, this new partnership probably will have direct access to about 650 million Indian minds as of now, assuming some inactive or duplicate users across the three. Add to that the indirect and direct control across several competing media houses and content, diversionary net neutrality, tech infrastructure, and political backing from more-than-willing policy makers, and we may see the power to monopolise not just industries, but more critically, our minds! Will the Google's decision to take a stake in Vodafone-Idea and also the planned Amazon-Airtel tie-up ward off this threat?

Reliance was always known to avoid competition in various ways including re-drawing of level-playing fields. Wherever they couldn't, as in its initial telecom foray and retail, they struggled. Its strength lies in influencing policy-making and executing very large-scale projects – from refineries to optical fibre networks. Remember the controversy when a hitherto non-existent Jio University was conferred with a specially created University of Eminence status by the government, overlooking many great institutions, to let it bypass educational regulators like AICTE?

While it has put a sense of urgency in the Indian government for data sovereignty, the big question is whether Indians will trust their data with a company having "maximising shareholder value" at its core over, say, a Tata Group whose values aim for "shared" growth. Here's an opportunity for it to stand for maximising "shared" values and push for data privacy more than data sovereignty, but will it?

Meek noises that Facebook makes and the muted tokenism it exhibits every time there is a charge of fake content or privacy breach should be cause of extreme concern for the

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AUTHOR



Dr Muneer

Muneer is a global expert columnist, writing on topical issues looked through management frameworks. He wears multiple hats including that of a social evangelist as the co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute that was mentored by the late Dr Kalam, management consultant and startup entrepreneur. His expertise is in strategy execution having worked with global brands across borders. Current passion is in driving governments to execute what they promise. He is the managing director of CustomerLab Solutions, an innovative consulting firm in partnership with leading minds of the world and also that of a US-based deep-tech startup. He pioneered the setting up of thought leadership seminar industry in India in the late 1990s and had been instrumental in delivering cutting-edge knowledge to the C-suite, in partnership with Times Group.

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enlightened. To be “harmless” is not part of FB’s ethos and it is just another “pure play” capitalist beholden only to its shareholders. In the Indian context, this high-handedness can be of immense advantage to the agenda-driven news “creators” of the ruling dispensation. This augurs well for these two partners and the government they support, but not for most other stakeholders.

That the Jio customers had let the “camel into the tent” was the butt of many social media jokes. Some former, perhaps disgruntled, Reliance suppliers crib about “long-day” ordeals with several rounds of negotiations across levels, with long gaps in between. Most employees work beyond 5 pm and stress-related health issues are likely. The company made a huge donation to PM CARES but unilaterally denied salaries to groups of employees in the Covid-19 crisis. Maximising “shared” value is not a part of its mission and it is great at tax avoidance. It is one of the top CSR taxpayers by statute but most of that is routed to in-house Trust (The government should not allow companies to route CSR funds to own Trusts which denies genuine NGOs like ours the much-needed funds, and stifle real developments on ground). Competitors talk of “multiple levels” of tactics to inconvenience them and squeeze their resources: From flooding high-cost but mediocre talent to lobbying policy makers/regulators (eg: IUC-interconnect usage charges abolition, data sovereignty). All these may be accusations by competitors but are critical events in our time-zero framework for predicting the future.

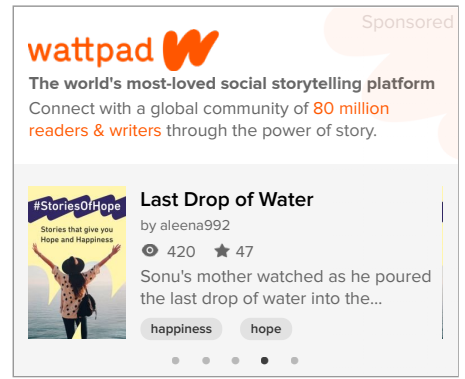
Monopolising informatics and digital communication will lead to monopolising minds, and if unregulated, could be the biggest fallout of this new venture. With media and content control, censoring and muting adverse content, development of new tech to know our thinking while we read a message, big data analytics and AI to know what we do at any point of time and predict our responses, and the ability to change minds with subliminal messaging, this behemoth can be a Frankenstein. We have already seen how quickly Indian minds can be diverted in the last few years. The stories that went viral for balcony clapping and diya lighting during lockdown are legends in the making! With a deeper knowledge of people than they themselves know, it is pretty easy to “influence” their minds.

Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), with its 70 million traders and 40,000 trade associations, has expressed its concerned about the use of consumer data. According to CAIT, Facebook has been known to violate domestic laws and the government should ensure that the data they already have should not be used for this new venture. They point out that it will be a total betrayal after having expressed reservations on this by the same government in the last term.

With data comes the power to create new products and services, and that is clearly an undue competitive advantage that will be created by this alliance, and it is surprising that the government shut an eye to this while granting FDI approval. The question is whether the government gives auto-approval for everything Reliance. How come the paranoia that was manifested in the case of suspect “Chinese” takeover of India was completely absent when it came to this FDI? Let’s hope the government will show the same enthusiasm to speedily approve both Google and Amazon FDI proposals. Remember how the government treated Amazon founder in his last trip to India with big investment plans?

Without a strong civil society, a bold Fourth Estate, a determined opposition, impartial constitutional authorities, a sound justice system, and a coalition of competitors from related industries coming together, the threats of data privacy breach and net non-neutrality, and creation of monopolies will not be averted. Why are competitors, civil society and clean politicians not pushing for stringent data privacy laws and lobbying against cross-ownership in competing media houses that infringe on “news neutrality”?

Given the global forces that are at play, the business ecosystem will brave the turmoil to



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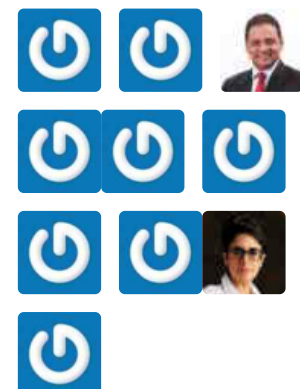
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some extent but many competitors will fade away as we have seen in the telecom sector post Jio launch. The indicators are for a duopoly as we see in most developed economies in various sectors from telecom to healthcare and e-commerce. Smaller players will be marginalised to special niches.

We can postulate with reasonable accuracy that this covert take-over of the Indian minds will be eventually replicated in countless other realms: infrastructure, thriving public sector entities, entertainment, defence, etc. A willing government will always find subversive partners but they also will do well to remember that such a monopoly can make or break governments too. Ayn Rand couldn't have known today's conglomerates when she had written on how the soul of capitalism was dead, but it is the perfect opportunity for Reliance, as a leader, to prove her wrong by "delighting" not just its shareholders.

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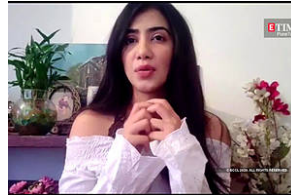
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